

LUNCH WITH “MR KURT”

We meet the Turkish businessman changing the future of the British Horse Racing Industry.



Mehmet Kurt is a businessman whose ‘revolutionary’ method of training racehorses could transform the world’s bloodstock industry.

Under the so-called Kurtssystem – which reduces the risk of injury to thoroughbreds by removing potential jockey error in early training – young horses undergo screening to determine their physiological capacity and proceed to be trained in harness on a mono-rail system. Gradually, and safely, they become accustomed to carrying the equivalent ‘bulk’ of a jockey by having small weights placed incrementally on their back. ‘Mr Kurt’, as he is known, claims that in Turkey, his prototype system is a proven winner. Now, the Kurtssystem is being introduced to Lambourn, where Mr Kurt is building his own equestrian centre at Kingwood Stud. The British racing industry awaits with interest.

Mr Kurt, however, is a man of parts. Besides, horses, he adores the finer things of life, good conversation, cigars and cognac and thus a natural fit to be the proud sponsor of the Boisdale Spectator Cigar Awards, whose guests last year included Arnold Schwarzenegger and Kelsey Grammar. 'I was extremely impressed,' he enthuses. 'It was very well organised. I may have to become a regular at Boisdale Canary Wharf. Ha-ha, life sometimes demands that you to take risks!' Mr Kurt also loves London, his adopted home, and has been awarded the Freedom of the City. 'Peaceful and stable,' is how he describes it. 'I appreciate that Londoners value people as human beings and individuals.'

How can Mr Kurt afford to invest millions in the Turf, and why is he living in Britain?

In 1968, as a young man of 22, he inherited his family's cotton business in his home town of Ceyhan (pronounced Jay-Han) in southern Turkey. His father, also Mehmet, was the pre-eminent local landowner and community-leader. But the business was underperforming. Productivity was low. Working conditions were harsh. Cotton fields lay idle. Kurt Jnr. decided to act. Casting abroad, he travelled to Georgia, Atlanta, the cotton belt of the United States. What could America teach Turkey about cotton?

'My guiding principle in business is to avoid the mainstream and ignore the fashion of the day,' says Mr Kurt, 'If you follow fashion, you get an ordinary return. I have always made extraordinary choices and decisions which seemed risky at the time but which have paid off more than any ordinary decision could ever bring about. Hence my going to Georgia.'

Mr Kurt shipped home several machines built to mechanise parts of the cotton-producing process. Once installed in Ceyhan, the machines soon produced results. Productivity soared and Ceyhan prospered. Mr Kurt's workforce swelled from 400 to 3,300. He operated three factories and diversified into textiles and confectionery. Then, he began to chafe at small-town life. In 1970, Mr Kurt moved to the bright lights of Istanbul.

Here, Mr Kurt had free reign to indulge his passion for horses, and saddled up two Turkish Derby winners. 'We all have early childhood memories,' he says. 'Mine were walking between the legs of horses as a toddler. I have ridden for pleasure ever since. I grew up with horses. I was inspired by mares struggling to keep alive her new-born twin foals. I believe a horse can tell if you are a good person or not; a horse can gauge your intentions. That is why certain people can communicate with horses, and why some jockeys are better than others. Horses have intuition. My method of training respects this.'

Back to business. In Istanbul, Mr Kurt diversified still further, moving into media, energy, chemicals, defence and medical sectors. He bought the 130-year-old Chocolate Royale brand, and invested in land and construction. As his wealth mushroomed, he never forgot his roots. He built three schools in Ceyhan and converted one of his houses into a public library. He transformed the local football club from amateurs into a professional unit fit for the Turkish national league.

In 1985, he planned a development in central Istanbul, the Marmara Sea Development Project comprising a hotel, residential block and shopping mall. Despite raising finance, the project failed because 'people were jealous' and because the Government was 'unwilling to support

it'. (Mr Kurt points out that Istanbul today is bursting with the very type of mall that he envisaged.) Undaunted, he bought a cement business dating from the 1920s. Its land, once fringing Istanbul but recently engulfed by the city's expansion, had become valuable. 'Unfortunately, some of the land, although private property, was illegally confiscated either by Istanbul city government or by the Turkish government,' says Mr Kurt. 'The Turkish government was acting against the fundamental principles of a liberal economy. This marked the beginning of my...problems.'

These 'problems' peaked when the Turkish municipality demolished his stud in Istanbul. He quit Turkey for Britain, intending to write his autobiography. Working title: 'Exile'. Settling into life in Britain, where, 'Private property is respected, and where my ideas will be appreciated', Mr Kurt bought Kingwood Stud near Lambourn in 2011, and began to plan an equestrian centre based on his training methods. Kingwood now hosts 75 horses.

How did he become inspired to develop the Kurtsystems? The answer is a story of passion about the wellbeing of the thoroughbred. In 1996 he bought Tambilot, a 'very valuable' racehorse, and shipped him from London to Istanbul. Under an inexperienced jockey, Tambilot was injured on his very first outing, and had to be retired. 'I thought of either quitting the horse business or finding a solution to the problem of human error when training horses,' says Mr Kurt. So he set about devising his system.

Mr Kurt is at pains to point out that the Kurtsystems is a 'pre-training' method, tried and tested in Turkey. 'It is not natural for a horse to carry a human being,' he says. 'If a jockey takes a corner at speed, the horse will balance itself. But if the jockey fails to act in harmony by bending to left or right, the resultant imbalance affects the pressure on the horse's legs. Just one centimetre out, and the horse's tendons can be irreparably damaged.' Before the horse can be ridden, it is gently loaded with silicon weights, beginning with 10kg rising to 60kg, and harnessed to a special 'car' which runs on rails alongside an all-weather track. This exercise is designed to strengthen muscles and acclimatise the horse to the heft of a rider while maintaining balance. 'During this phase, we learn the horse's potential by measuring vital signs, heart rate, blood levels and respiratory system,' says Mr Kurt. 'If the heart rate exceeds a certain level at 35kph, the Kurtsystems is alerted and the horse's training programme adapted accordingly. Being jockey-free, it is the safest way of breaking in a horse. One vet in Australia says that 70 per cent of racehorses are lost to injury at this early stage of their lives. My system reduces this risk almost to zero. We will refine the Kurtsystems by research and development using data gleaned from our methods.'



Where did this drive and vision spring from? Was it Mr Kurt's father, or something in Mr Kurt's upbringing, or both? 'I am not sure what my father or environment contributed,' he says. 'Where I come from, boys go through a strict education. They learn to be strong, tough and to fight against difficulties. My father was one of the first industrialists in Turkey. I wasn't born when he founded his first factory, but I learnt these things by implication; I learnt them without knowing how I learnt them.'

Mr Kurt intends to turn the Kurtsystems into a business. Horses trained by him in Turkey have become champions. 'If we can produce champions in Britain, we will have no trouble persuading the horse community to adopt my system,' he says. 'Overcoming the initial hurdles of acceptance by the British horse racing industry is the first step. Today Lambourn, tomorrow the world.'

Tambilot, who has enjoyed a long retirement munching grass, would probably agree.